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Review by Sarah E. Minnis

After Combat: True War Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Marian Eide & Michael Gibler | Potomac, 2018. 280 pp. ISBN 978-1640120235

In the post-9/11 era, there have been numerous accounts of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq written from a variety of perspectives and for multiple purposes. Whether biographical accounts of real events, authoritative news essays, or fictional stories of war-time heroism and loss, the American public has been offered untold perspectives on what military service and sacrifice in this new era looks like. Making these stories all the more real, Hollywood has added their lens and sheen to produce motion picture versions of many of the tales, in their attempt to bring us ever closer to understanding what the actual combat experience is like. What the books and glossy productions miss, however, is the raw, unfiltered voices of the service members sharing their experiences in their own words.

After Combat: True War Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan by Marian Eide and Michael Gibler, is a unique collection of stories of military service in the combat theater as told by veterans themselves. Presented as a themed collection of narratives, the veterans' stories are unedited text from interviews recounting some of the most daunting and dull experiences of their combat deployments, to some of the most dangerous locations of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and their return to civilian life. Rather than relying on professional writers or Hollywood scripts to tell their stories, the participating veterans speak directly to the audience giving voice to the fears, regrets, heartbreaks, and joys they experienced while inhabiting combat zones. Instead of boastful tales of heroism, the veterans share some of their most personal experiences with which some continue to struggle. Presented as an alternative to the slick Hollywood version of military service, *After Combat* gives the reader a realistic view of life as a combat service member and veteran.

The authors each bring backgrounds seminal to their aim to produce a book of real combat experiences. While their contributions are primarily collecting and synthesizing the collected stories into themes and providing context for each theme, it is not lost on the reader that the material, in lesser hands, would not include the depth of content or be presented in as meaningful and purposeful a way. Marian Eide is an associate professor of English at Texas A&M University specializing in ethics and war in twentieth century works. Her understanding of war and the moral ambiguity as it is presented in literature, is vital to the non-judgmental presentation of veterans' stories rooted in the current military conflicts.

Eide's previous work also reflects her interest in exploring issues of gender and feminism impacted by war and social issues as shown in her article "'The stigma of nation': Feminist just war, privilege, and responsibility" (2008). Likewise, her previous book *Ethical Joyce* (2002), explored the undercurrents of social justice and ethics in James Joyce's writing. Eide's contribution to the current work provides the kind of literary and subject matter grace necessary for presenting challenging war-time reflections. Col. Michael Gibler (Ret.) is a twenty-eight-year veteran of the United States Army, with combat experience throughout the globe including multiple deployments in the current wars. His military infantry experience, rather than hardening him, has given Gibler a deep sense of selfless purpose and understanding of the real impacts of close quarters combat on the troops undertaking it. Leading the Army ROTC program at Texas A&M University, his alma mater, gave Gibler the opportunity to serve as teacher, advisor, confidante, and mentor to hundreds of commissioning

cadets. In this role, one of his final assignments prior to retiring, Gibler also spent time with student veterans returning to college after military service. In him, they found an understanding ear who challenged them to find purpose after their combat experiences. Gibler's contribution to eliciting stories and building trust between the authors and the veterans cannot be underappreciated.

As a compilation of war stories, *After Combat* does not follow the usual narrative style of presenting each veteran's story one-by-one without giving context to the connections. Rather, the authors use thematic analysis to find stories within each veteran's narrative that connect to and draw upon the others' similar experiences by theme. Beginning with stories about why the service members joined the various branches of the United States military, the authors create a sense of continuity of experience between the veterans' stories, reminding the reader that the commonality of experience is what connects veterans. The authors take readers through themes that explore the challenges, joys, traumas, tragedies, and memories of military service in the war-torn areas of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Veterans' stories of their entries into the warzone, show the ways in which many of them were unprepared for combat theater despite pre-deployment training. Stories of exploring the local culture, interacting with civilians and military, and gaining a broader understanding of their surroundings, is contrasted in the veterans' stories with a sense of futility and inability to have the impact they desired. In presenting a realistic perspective of combat warfare, the authors integrate some of the veterans' most difficult memories of losing friends, international colleagues, and trusted civilians in addition to the veterans' reconciling the errors and arrogant disregard by poor leadership with trust in the larger mission and the service members beside them. Included are stories themed around the veterans' return to civilian life in the United States, with concerns about how to answer difficult questions like, "Did you kill anyone?" and respond to the often-heard "thank you for your service." Veterans' desires to make sense and explain the value of their military service in higher education and to employers, are some of the common struggles presented through their stories of reintegration to life beyond military service.

To be clear, *After Combat* is not an easy read for those unfamiliar with military service, war, or combat. The veterans' stories are presented in raw form from their narrative interviews. Their experiences are not softened in the text or diluted for the reader's consumption. Indeed, those entirely unfamiliar with the military may be quite shocked by the matter-of-fact manner in which the veterans address their experiences; but, it is this realism which is of the most significant value to the format in which the stories are shared. To talk of horrific wartime experiences, deep friendships formed through long hours in unbearable heat, and beautiful people and landscapes far away, veterans' voices cannot be smoothed to sound more palpable if they are to express the significance of the lived experience in combat.

The authors' use of themes to align similar experiences by concept, while maintaining the service members' voices and agency in telling their stories, creates a work that readers should find meaningful in theme as well as by story within each theme. For those who have served in military combat, or have loved ones who have served, *After Combat* may be difficult to read for many of the same reasons. Reliving one's own experiences through the unvarnished realism of others' stories could evoke strong feelings for some readers. By contrast, some readers may find comfort in the familiarity of the veterans' stories and shared experiences. For veterans feeling alone and isolated in civilian life, knowing that others are encountering similar challenges but have shared fond memories of their time in war may bring peace of mind.

The greatest value of *After Combat* is in the authors' achievement of their aims: to create a book that bridges the gap between what Hollywood and the media has presented to the public about the realities of war and the actual realities of war and combat. Without the filters of professional writers

and reporters creating a narrative they can use to promote a product, including the product of war, Eide and Gibler have given the veterans' ownership of their stories to create their book. By using themes to coalesce the service members' stories and introducing each theme in context, the authors have allowed the focus to remain on the veterans' experiences while creating a structure that adds to the impact and value of the stories shared. *After Combat: True War Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan* should be read by anyone who wants to gain a greater understanding of what life in and after combat is really like. It may be of particular interest to those who are engaged in research with military veterans but have not served in the military.

References

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Sarah E. Minnis

Assistant Professor

Western Carolina University